Smashing Pumpkins
gish

"When I listen to *Gish*," Billy Corgan says today, "what I hear is a beautiful naïveté."

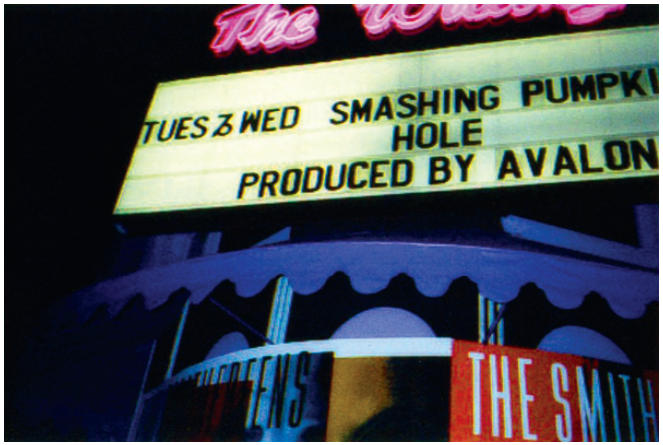
They say you never forget the first time, and even twenty years later, the 1991 debut album by Smashing Pumpkins — guitarist and vocalist Corgan, drummer Jimmy Chamberlin, bassist D'arcy Wretzky and guitarist James Iha — remains the unforgettable start of a musical conversation that continues to resonate with millions of fans all around the world.

In retrospect, *Gish* can clearly be heard as a groundbreaking album in the history of what would soon become more much widely known as alternative rock. *Gish* was, after all, the promising debut of a band that would help alternative rock quickly become part of a new, grungier mainstream. But back in the beginning, *Gish* was simply the memorable opening salvo by a band from Chicago that really didn't fit in anywhere in the rock world — that is, until bands like Smashing Pumpkins helped change the rock world once and for all.

To hear Corgan tell it now, Smashing Pumpkins came by their beautiful naïveté naturally. "We'd had very little exposure to the national stage," he explains. "There's no way that if we had been exposed to all of what was going on in New York and L.A. earlier, we would have made *Gish*. This is one of those weird albums that sounds like it came from some guy who crawls up out of the basement holding a record in his hands proudly — a little like the first time we heard Dinosaur Jr. You think, 'who the hell *is* this? And where did *that* come from?'"

According to Corgan, the album originally came from Smashing Pumpkins' early vow of poverty. "The roots of *Gish* are the fact that the band had a policy then that nobody made any money from the shows, so we could save up to record" he explains. "It was amazing that everyone agreed to it because none of us had any money back then. So by 1989 we had collected a couple grand from playing club gigs. A guy named Mark Ignoffo, who lived in the neighborhood near where I worked at the used record store, had just graduated studio-engineering school. It turned out he had set up a studio in his parents' basement, so in 1989 we took that saved money and made an album — even though we had *no one* to make an album for. There was absolutely nobody interested in our band. So we just made an album-plus worth of material hoping somebody would become interested. And if you listen to that material, it sounds very much like *Gish* turned out."

Smashing Pumpkins made a few copies of songs from these basement tapes, and gave one tape to Joe Shanahan, the owner of the Metro club in Chicago. "I didn't hear back from Joe for a month, and I remember thinking 'that's *not* a very good sign'," Corgan remembers. "But then after a month, Joe told me, 'I can't get this thing out of my car stereo.' Joe said he wanted to send the songs to some people he knew in Los Angeles. That's how we got our first managers — Andy Gershon



and Raymond Coffer who at the time were managing The Cocteau Twins and Love and Rockets, both of whom we were fans of. Ultimately this led to us getting signed — though true to form, we did that by taking a weird path too."

After releasing their first ever single "I Am One" on Chicago's tiny Limited Potential label, the Pumpkins tried to get signed to the famed independent Seattle label Sub Pop, already the early home to Nirvana and Soundgarden. "They could have had us for nothing and a song, but of course, Sub Pop weren't really interested in us at all," Corgan says. "But they threw us the bone of doing a Sub Pop Single of The Month. That's when Virgin — now EMI — stepped forward and said they wanted to sign us. Sub Pop came back offering us an album deal, but by then it was too late."

The Smashing Pumpkins signed to Virgin with the stipulation that they could release a debut on Caroline Records first. "We didn't want the trap door to open if the first record didn't sell well," explains Corgan. "Our idea wasn't to conquer the world. Our idea was to put together a good first record on an independent, then tour our rear ends off, and get our act together. That way by the time we made our second record for a major label, we'd be a better band and have a bigger opportunity. Then we'd be ready to try and climb the holy mountain."

One man who did a great deal to make The Smashing Pumpkins better was producer Butch Vig, who met the band when he was behind the boards for the band's Sub Pop Single of the Month "Tristessa" backed with "La Dolly Vita." Vig had been recommended by Mike Potential of Limited Potential. "Then I heard a record Butch did with Die Kreuzen, and I thought the kick drum sounded fantastic for an indie record," says Corgan. "That did the trick. Jimmy's such a powerful drummer, and I figured this guy could capture what Jimmy was doing. Then I found out Butch had been in the band Firetown, so I felt like this guy knew what he was doing."

In 1990, The Smashing Pumpkins drove to Madison, Wisconsin for two days to cut the Sub Pop single, and were quickly impressed. "The great thing about Butch was like Pro Tools before Pro Tools perfection. He really stressed sonics and good singing. Before Butch, I didn't understand even the concept of what it meant to sing in tune. I mean that literally. Butch insisted on getting it right so the band sounded super tight. But I find all great producers have a similar quality. Beyond their talent, they're someone you like hanging out with after a twelve-hour day. You're still laughing with them. Butch is a very warm person, and we knew him *before* he became 'Butch Vig.' He's also got this Midwestern quality of playing it all down. He's doesn't act like one of the great rock producers of all time — which he is."

Recording *Gish* was done in spurts. "We would drive up to Madison for four days at a time – or six days at a time. We had no money, so Jimmy and I were staying with some really nice college girls who let us stay in their house for free. That gave us a little more money for the record. The studio was $500 a day, and that was with Butch included. If my memory serves me correctly, it took us 41 days to record the album and seventeen days to mix."

In the high profile and sometimes traumatic years that would follow, The Smashing Pumpkins would prove to be a highly volatile group. But as Corgan says today, "The thing that distinguishes *Gish* for me was how incredibly supportive the band was of the vision I had. That was a leap of faith then — because even though we were drawing good crowds and getting a good reaction, you'd only have to walk outside the club to find someone who thought we were too loud, or too this or that. There were people who said my voice was too weird, and yet the band was incredibly supportive of me."

That said, The Smashing Pumpkins was never the coziest of rock bands. "I think what made the Pumpkins special was that we weren't a rock & roll gang," says Corgan. "We were four completely different people. And even though James and D'arcy were a couple at the time, they were totally different personalities too — like Lucy and Desi from TV. It was clear, if we weren't a band, we would not all be hanging out much. But we were a band at heart. One thing I like to distinguish is that there was only one mention of us in the Chicago press before *Gish* came out. We would play the Metro and draw 800 people, but no one in the media noticed. We were totally ignored. Fortuitously, we fell between the cracks then, but eventually made a place for ourselves. No one else got us, but *we* did."

And right from the release of *Gish*, fans got Smashing Pumpkins too — more than the band itself even dared to imagine. "Our expectations then were definitely not to take over the world, but just to take us to the next level. Our expectations weren't low, but then *Gish* somehow ended up being at the time the largest selling independent album ever. I think it sold 400,000 copies in its first year. People really liked it, but it also engendered a big negative reaction. We'd go into a club and play with the local cool band, and we would be twice as loud, and Jimmy would be fucking ripping the roof of the place with his playing. We didn't look like other bands either. We were too thrift store hippy-looking. At the same time all these people loved us, others were throwing bottles and booing. So within the group, we hung together pretty well through the whole journey of *Gish* — and it was a pretty long journey because we toured behind the album for 14 months."

Ultimately, Corgan is proudest of *Gish* as an overall musical effort than as a collection of songs. "The thing about *Gish* is that there really aren't a lot of great songs, it's really more of a dynamic statement. I wouldn't say there are many great songs but there are a lot of great ideas that are taking chances."

Finally, as for the album's title, Corgan says, "The only thing I've ever been able to attribute it to is that I remember a story my grandmother, who was born in 1911 and came of age during the silent movie era, had told me once when I was a kid. She talked about how stars would do these whistle-stop train tours, and she remembers going down to the train station, and Lillian Gish, who was like the #1 movie star in the world at the time, was there on the back of a train. She talked about the power of that moment and the impression it made. Somehow the name *Gish* stuck somewhere deep in my mind."

David Wild
September 2011

Gish Track By Track

I Am One: A statement of spiritual unity, based on the gnosis of the holy trinity. Lyrically stripped from an article I'd read on Bishop Desmond Tutu. Our first single, re-born here faster, Jack-over-the-candlestick nimble. Yellow Strat on the left, Black Les Paul on the right. Full pan. An unmistakable drum rattle from the venerable, now closed Smart Studios in Madison, Wisconsin. Just an amble down the road from the ominous state capitol. Laws are made, laws to be broken. I am one, you are one. Infinite repeat.

Siva: A misspell on Shiva the inhaler, the loving destroyer. A riff born whilst working away at the used record store on Broadway, watching humanity walk by dying. A prototyped blueprint of many that would follow. A breakthrough; finding the perfect light, capturing our essence that matches street power against eternal grace. Laced with LSD visions of making love by the glow of the streetlight blasting into my room on the second floor, illuminating the night. Christmas lights strung along where the pictures should be.

Rhinoceros: Idealism hidden amongst the ruins of a sentimental smear. Pandas, balloons, ice cream kids and cones; a knowing girl bats her eyelashes at you across the fairground. You know her, but you know she knows. But what is it that she knows about you? Secrets are held up for instant review, then blasted across the stratosphere with happy hope. No one is there to catch your dreams where they fall. Your dreams are all mustard lies, you see. You must open your eyes now to what you don't want to see.

Bury Me: Bury me in love. Bury me in blood. These lines have no connection to a meaning. Impressions strung along the wires, criss-crossing chants and chasms. Nothing has any meaning. I am buried beneath non-meaning. We are lost. Songs like these point the way; dead ends that are worth coming into blindly with fatal force. I often forget songs like this exist, but they are testament to a faith I once had, now forgotten.

Crush: My future wife sleeps across the room, it's 3 a.m. I am far too shy to write a song like this in front of anyone, even her. Her apartment sits above a restored, historic theatre. The riff is stolen, but I can never say where it came from. I am shamed by that, but I make it mine nonetheless. I want to be an original, without a prior copy. I cannot escape that I am made up of tiny, stitched together pieces. Curtis Mayfield's poetry inspires the romantic lyric. The whole world shimmers for all at night. Light dances off the face of my beloved. I am both in love and crushed by love. The bells are there to remind me.

Suffer: Existential love is for lovers, a raga dedicated to being trapped in who you are. A girl I love once and still hands me a penny whistle, and says 'do you know how to play?' I am the piper, calling in the morning hues with my simple melody. An apocalypse comes with my tune, riders now face the dawn. They have come to behead those who stand along the road, so we run and hide in the dense jungles instead. They will come for us anyway. Instead of fighting we will dance around a fire. We cease to be. Pan plays the flute far better than I.

Snail: 7 dreams. 7 and 7 is? 7. A girl I've named 'Flower.' She puts the sun on her tongue, tastes the stars like snowflakes. The height of who we would have been if we didn't always need to have more, and more, and then some more. The last of the innocents here. The drums are cut in one take, in a flurry of savant madness. His nose is broken, busted open in chivalry of cause. A siren calls to a snail who moves far too slow. But no one can catch him, so he moves fast enough I suppose. An electric guitar is held in front of the amp on fire until the glue shakes loose from the wood, and the tubes light up into phosphorescent blue. Hearts explode into diamonds, spades, clubs, and hollow rings.

Tristessa: Lifted from author Jack Kerouac's book of the same name, written, I think, about a Spanish prostitute. I see myself not as a whore but as a mirrored reflection in the feminine creative mind. I will await the artist within to come out to play. I call out her name longingly, coyly. Maybe I know that the artist in me is indeed meant to be a whore? Our second single this was, re-recorded to try to clarify an earlier version. In the trade-off something vital gets lost. I won't even bother to try to make it better, a shrug of ambivalence. I have already moved on from her.

Window Paine: Coming down off the long trip now. It's almost over people. There is still one more vista to reach, one last dive into the deep. Pistons start to sputter, the wings start to sag, nose points straight down. The window to my heart is opened up with lysergic acid and strychnine. Alchemy pries open now what a crowbar cannot. We are in the ethers now. With no oxygen, the ends fray and even the pleasantries are over. It's a rude conclusion to draw. An awakening. The trip doesn't end, it just stops.

Daydream: An oath in neon blue. One last simple thought to share. The other voice sings the song because the voice is prettier, more cold and far away. It's a beautiful dream but we know it ain't gonna happen; who are we fooling here? Still, it's nice to hum along. A husband and wife descend from the heavens to play the last little coda. They do not wear white. Our first encounter with the other way.

Billy Corgan
September 2011

Original Credits:

Original album Produced by Butch Vig and Billy Corgan
Recorded at Smart Studios in beautiful Madison, Wisconsin
December 1990 – March 1991
Remastered by Bob Ludwig at Gateway Mastering, Portland, Maine, 2011

Reissue Credits

Reissue Produced by Billy Corgan and Kerry Brown
Reissue Co-Produced by Dennis Wolfe, Michael Murphy and David K. Tedds

Legal Saviour – Jill Berliner
Reissue Design/Layout – Noel Waggener
Cover photos – Robert Knapp
Inner photos courtesy of Billy Corgan, Jimmy Chamberlin & Robert Knapp

The Smashing Pumpkins:
Billy Corgan – guitar, vocals
James Iha – guitar
D'arcy – bass, vocals on "Daydream"
Jimmy Chamberlin – drums

All songs by Billy Corgan (Cinderful Music, BMI) except:
"I Am One" by Billy Corgan and James Iha
(Cinderful Music, BMI / Cellophane Star Music, BMI)

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